



**JAYANTA MAHAPATRA** (1929- ), The most celebrated Indo-English poet, is the author of *nine* books of poems. Winner of the 1975 Jacob Glastein Memorial Award of Chicago's *Poetry* magazine and the 1981 National Academy of Letters Award, Mahapatra is getting increasingly well known in the U.S.S.R. the U.S.A. Japan, New Zealand, Australia, Canada, England, Denmark and Itlay. In 1976 he was a visiting writer with the International Writing Program, Iowa City and spent a week as visiting writer at St. Andrews Presbyterion College in North Carolina. In 1978, Mahapatra was named Australia's Cultural Award Visitor and in 1980 he received the Japan Foundation Visitor's Award. His works have appeared in various internationally known journals like *Hudson Review*, *New Letters*, *Asia Week*, *Poetry*, *Kenyon Review*, *Sewanee Review*, *boundary 2*, *New York Quarterly*, *Times Literary Suppliment*, *Queen's Quarterly* and *Westerly*.

His new book of poems *Burden of Waves and Fruit* will be published by Three Continents Press, Washington D.C. soon. In 1985, Mahapatra visited the U. S. S. R. as an Indo-Soviet Cultural Exchange Writer. In the beginning of this year, he was awarded a fellowship by the Rockfeller Foundation to write poetry in Itlay. These days Mahapatra lives in Cuttack where he edits *Chandrabhaga*, a magazine of new writing from India and acts as poetry editor of *The Telegraph*.



# DISPOSSESSED NESTS

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## THE 1984 POEMS

JAYANTA MAHAPATRA

*Nirala Series-4*

Edited By

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## **BY THE SAME AUTHOR**

### **POETRY :**

**Close the Sky, Ten by Ten**

**Svayamvara & Other Poems**

**A Father's Hours**

**A Rain of Rites**

**Waiting**

**The False Start**

**Relationship**

**Life Signs**

**Burden of Waves & Fruit (forthcoming)**

### **POETRY TRANSLATIONS :**

**Countermeasures, 1973**

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**Chandrabhaga : (A magazine of new writing from India)**

**The Telegraph : Poetry Editor**

**for**

**Alec and Penelope Hope**



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*Yuyutsu R. D. : A Prayer In Daylight*

*Jayanta Mahapatra : Dispossessed Nests*

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## INTRODUCTION

A thirsty pitcher hit the heart of a well and a cry cracked in the sunken throat of a peacock.

If this evening was different from others, it was for the fact that even though the sun had shattered its head on the horizon's rim, the rain of fire kept pouring in from above

Heads adroop over cracked wooden tables, we sat in a deserted restaurant shaken by the resurged violence of Punjab. One of us belongs to Punjab and the increasing number of corpses piling up in the vaults of our consciousness made us strongly think about the question of migration.

But was it possible ?

In Chandigarh and New Delhi high flown speeches were being delivered from the cool bullet proof cells and pompous drama of peace rallies feigned to beguile the burning winds of hatred. Deep in us, the beats of Bhangra footsteps and dance of tassels in the golden wheatfields stirred notes of nostalgia. With a helpless sigh we swallowed the metaphors of memory and made plans of migrating from Punjab !

But was it really possible ?

A few years ago in Delhi we met a man, Shiv Kumar, from a small village near Batala. He could tell the taste of his village well's water even if you place a thousand pitchers before him. The juice of his own landscape he could identify because his blood vessels were emotionally linked with the fields, streets, ponds—with the each and every object of his village.

Now, when Shiv has to desert his village, won't the blood of broken vessels splatter in the streets ?

In *Dispossessed Nests* one hears these wails of a world shattered within a human heart : Like burning rods of truth Mahapatra's poems branded the screens of our consciousness. In these poems we find deeply anguished outpours of an acutely sensitive man aspiring to capture a disintegrated world in the light of metaphors deriving their heat either from the torturous memory of the country's recent past or from a minute observation of the natural components.

But these metaphors of Mahapatra aren't just verbal jewels, they are exquisitely evocative memoirs of the whole Indian community. Employing this ingenious metaphoric technique, Mahapatra succeeds in introducing the new grammar of the country's simmering chaos. The world of nature is rendered in the context of the frustration of a turbulent community : 'The dry riverbed/wrapped up in a shroud of moonlight,' 'Pale moonlight/tills/death's wild land', 'Sultry July/the grasses of the dead/are growing fast', 'This night of the decaying bodies', 'the ruined light of stars', 'The white truck with painted AMBULANCE fighting my thoughts in the sun', 'when river floods with the tumours of noiseless tears', 'the peacock's curve is measured with flames of hate.'

The natural components like rainbow, seashore, sky, riverbed, shadow and sun are employed to reflect upon the tendency of a nation squirming in chaos :

Blades of light,  
the July heat,  
and two tipped-out eyes  
shaking their tears.

What time is it now ?  
It is that moment perhaps  
when the rainbow chokes  
at the end of its leash.

Mahapatra fills the vessels of stereotyped words with new meanings. Creatively inverting the shades of hackneyed words he succeeds in presenting a dazzlingly sincere account of the harsh realities

Punjab and Bhopal are the chief events of the book. In

case of Punjab using colour imagery ('In the eyes/of the mask  
roo/is a trembling/of purple'), Mahapatra exposes the buried  
horror of the long and supreme knives :

Around  
a slender waist  
a petticoat stirs  
in the wind,  
looking absurd,  
the torso  
looking about  
for its missing head.

Similarly, in Bhopal the poet sees the self-centered dance  
of the bejewelled snakes blinding the impoverished eyes; an ugly  
dance of the multinational companies, a dance more demonic  
than the *Tandava* of Shiva...a living hell of the crying, dying  
people gasping for breath !

Instead of sucking their energy from the veins of real  
life, the poems explore the theoretical contexts of the Punjab  
and Bhopal events. In the lucent light of the minute shifts in the  
natural world the journalistic content of the book is flared. In  
poem 15, for example, the issue of 'The sealed tomb of one's  
faith', the fanatics' blind faith in the heroic hereditary is artistically  
explored :

Pray then to those fanatics who love their god as they love  
themselves,  
to the veins filthy with blood and to the belly  
fattened with the brackish fluid or seeding  
when eyes grow misty with light one has never seen--

In the same outspoken vein Mahapatra evokes the issue  
of sacrifice in vain :

Pray to the sealed tomb of one's faith  
raging with the leucocytes in the blood of that hidden animal  
to the clenched fist, and hack those useless arms  
which will only inherit  
our mothers's spirit of sacrifice bringing freedom in death

Mahapatra narrates the hijacking episode to analyse the national  
addiction to violence :

...Maybe  
there were women on the aircraft  
who fell in love with their captors.  
And the bullets didn't hurt too perhaps...

The vermilion on the woman's forehead  
ripples in the dark. Her kid daughter wants  
her favorite hijacking anecdote narrated again  
to lull her to sleep.

In the same elegiac tone the poet reflects upon the  
great betrayal by the corrupt political leaders :

The weariness of the ages festers  
into hard knots of meanness here and there

The taste that comes of our leaders  
shirking the questions of people's existence

— — —  
The tall dark mountains burying their faces  
in the false snow to stifle their laughter

— — —  
..No more. Ah love, we had read so much  
*about you, about freedom. Was everything you did,*  
*Gandhiji, only an act you put on for posterity ?*

with India, our India, barely worth raping ?

The melancholic and meditative tone of the poems ultimately lands you in a lonely island where you feel you are all alone in your struggles. Of course you do feel the agony of the world around passionately but you do not possess the fire of a spiritual struggle of a potent community reacting against the callous forces of a corrupt socio-economic setup. You feel you are floating in the sky of your own suffering, completely lost in a state of mental inertia where you 'nurse the sickness of fear', where you hear, 'water folding and turning restlessly on stone', where 'Fears of sinking boats blacken' your noons, where 'An owl circles and chases ■ tale/through the leaves,' and 'a star/looks fixed in space's old embrace'. And an eloquent shower of metaphors drenches you only if you belong completely to your inner island, thoroughly familiar with its subtle moods.

Summer, 1986  
JAIPUR

Yuyutsu R. D.  
Ramanand Rathi

## BEWILDERED WHEATFIELDS

*"The light of the earth comes out of its eyelids  
not like a bell's ringing, but more like tears"*

—Pablo Neruda

**1**

The dry riverbed  
wrapped up in a shroud of moonlight.

A death lasts.

This night of the decaying bodies  
of those whom I love,

reverberates  
with the ruined light of stars.

## 2

In these parts down south  
we say we are calm people  
who go to sleep without misgivings.  
We never take our lives seriously.  
Or perhaps  
we don't let ourselves get carried away.

But somewhere  
amidst bewildered wheatfields  
the cool night wind snips off the skin  
from the firm fruit of reason.  
The earth is God in a rage.  
Sunlight is too silent an energy  
running over and over endlessly.

And elsewhere  
a temple drifts away  
from vague stretched-out hands.  
And God asks:  
What is your thunder about, dark skies?  
Must you dry up the river to hear the sands breathe?  
Is your hate of man your ultimate fate?



**3**

Here  
my father lies dying,  
I watch him die.

Night spreads.  
Maybe it is time,

or perhaps the thought  
of an hour at his bedside  
stupifies a part of me  
that's not already doomed,  
up north somewhere.

## 4

There's probably something good  
on television tonight.

Another death?

A little pile of ash  
uncurls  
like a woken beast.

## 5

In the eyes  
of the mask too,  
is a trembling  
of purple.

Around  
a slender waist  
a petticoat stirs  
in the wind,  
looking absurd,  
the torso  
looking about  
for its missing head.

Pale moonlight  
tills  
death's wild land,  
a roil of smoke  
seems  
to lift its hands  
in supplication.

## 6

Sultry July,  
the grasses of the dead  
are growing fast.

A little girl's hate  
is already  
a part of her,  
rainwater splatters  
like  
her murdered father's blood.

When did she  
get used to the world?  
She  
frightens us.

## 7

To be human  
is to see in a dream perhaps  
the one who can never be seen;  
perhaps to hire out a tractor  
to work the fields  
or to hook the slippery little carp  
which swim  
among the muddy puddles

8

Nothing very bad or untoward, they all insist.  
 The terrorist who hijacked Flight 405  
 to Lahore even doled out milk and fruit  
 to children and the old. He was a mere  
 boy, they said, he even smiled,  
 shook hands and broke down in the end  
 when everything got over. Maybe  
 Kiran wanted to believe something good too  
 had come out of it. Maybe it would help  
 to make sense out of the fact  
 how humane the terrorists were. Even days after  
 the nightmare it's hard to believe  
 the Kapurs shouting *Long Live Khalistan*  
 alongwith the terrorists in unison,  
 like well-trained protesters. Maybe  
 there were women on the aircraft  
 who fell in love with their captors.  
 And the bullets didn't hurt too perhaps....

The vermilion on the woman's forehead  
 ripples in the dark. Her kid daughter wants  
 her favorite hijacking anecdote narrated again  
 to lull her to sleep.

## 9

As abstinate as the old,  
this thought of death.

Years ago, just a ghost  
without a name, a trembling  
at a door near the windows.

My heart is intricate now,  
it resents objects, the doorbell,  
the perfect mirror,  
it gouges the impatient darkness  
in the city of the round-the-clock  
curfew, and the white trucks  
painted AMBULANCE fighting  
my thought in the sun.

**10**

This is the last explosion,  
we hope,  
and wait.

How we wonder  
in the mind's expanding nova,  
the dispossessed nests.



## 11

The wind fills with darkness.

It closes the door softly and goes out  
suddenly like a traffic light. It carries  
the excited beat of lines of marchers  
protesting against a corrupt government,  
and the voice of the lonely woman  
standing in the queue for her sustenance allowance  
(her husband shot dead by terrorists last month)—  
a voice which the roar  
of the Minister's jet cuts short.

And the old man whom I call Father  
slowly opens his mouth to swallow  
the spoonfuls of glucose being fed to him.  
I have been watching him lie in his bed  
for over two years now.

The wind bothers me with its mysterious freedom,  
with no memory of the voices of the recent dead  
or of those who died before them.  
Whose voice is it I hear now ? Theirs,  
or my mother's  
waiting in the hush for Father's death ?  
A finger of the wind  
merely tickles my consciousness.

## 12

The man of the house  
walks back  
to the afternoon  
and sits in a fear.

Blades of light,  
the July heat,  
and two ripped-out eyes  
shaking their tears.

What time is it now?  
It is that moment perhaps  
when the rainbow chokes  
at the end of its leash.

Only the headlines  
in the newspapers  
sweep pompously across  
the clock-face of death.

**13**

All day long  
fiery dusts seethe  
on the plains of the heart.

Swifts, like spirits,  
claim the lost air  
of Shakuni-skies;

under a merciless sun  
angry masks barter faith  
with the golden litany of the Punjab.

How long the journey is,  
and the light  
leaping in the skin --

how like a fine wind  
this nature of evil  
we cannot feel flowing in the warm dusk.

## 14

Darkness stalks  
the streets somewhere.  
Eyes of bright yellow sunflowers  
reveal their fright.  
Someone who walks in the dark  
wants his victim strong and powerful,  
he promises himself  
the blood of a minister  
or high government official.  
No dreams blow in the unlocked skull.  
Only shadows  
pick up the reigns of reality in Amritsar,  
shadows  
of long and supreme knives.

## 15

When the unwelcome memory appears  
with its gesture of the deathless, domestic as a mother,  
naked as a traveller from another place  
and stands there a moment like a knifed youth  
in the marketplace holding up his burst entrails  
as he falls and ruffles his black silky hair,

when the drunken woman of the indulgent lie  
starts shrieking with laughter, her face  
lifted with the new caste of liberation and reality —  
when the peacock's curve is measured with flames of hate  
and the monsoon rain of whiteness withers up like skin  
when the tides of light end with streaks of sullen  
blackness  
and the numbed weeds sway with the dead heads of  
their flowers,

Pray then to those fanatics who love their god as  
they love themselves,

to the veins filthy with blood and to the belly  
fattened with the brackish fluid of seeding  
when eyes grow misty with light one has never seen—

when the memory appears again over a land

with that air of a mother which makes us simply  
clutch our hearts in grief,  
when the river floods with tumours of noiseless tears

in the orange-coloured masks of possessed firedancers  
 who must dance past their dead to paralyze us with fear,  
 and the silence bought by slaughter and subversion  
 becomes one eager ink-black splotch in the map of the skin

Pray to the sealed tomb of one's faith  
 raging with the leucocytes in the blood of that  
hidden animal  
 to the clenched fist, and hack those useless arms  
 which will only inherit  
 our mothers's spirit of sacrifice bringing freedom in death

**16**

Death throes  
of epics locked inside shadows

The young terrorist's face  
is illuminated  
by the light of his grandest hour

The hail of glass and plaster  
looks on at his humility  
as the calendar hatches India's history

a lifeless story  
chewed on by the vultures of a country's leaders

## 17

It is the silence. Words  
can only ask the wrong question  
at the wrong time.  
For silence is the only evidence  
left behind, strange solace  
for mankind.

Alive,  
scarlet colours swirled,  
the clear, sharp cold,  
time of the hollow wound  
and the incinerated sun,  
time of the unloved earth.

Lonelier than ever  
is this autumn of smoke and ash.  
But the air is awake  
and I have forgotten how to love.  
And an empty smile on the grass  
I can never again trust.

Behind,  
the open door.  
A silence remains stretched  
beyond measure, the heart  
of our knowledge's labyrinth  
born from an ignorance of our own.





## 19

The city wanders.  
I try to locate Betelgeuse.  
Even as a child I remember  
I would look up,  
until the moon and stars  
were lost behind me.  
Today I lean back against that light  
which smells of stale sweat  
and less pleasant things.

Here the last houses in the city  
are simply smiling into the darkness.  
Now a man knows only two ways  
for dealing with a stray woman:  
he rapes her  
and he kills her.

## 20

The weariness of t    ages festers  
into hard knots of meanness here and there

The taste that comes of our leaders  
shirking the questions of people's existence

The shame of travellers who have lost their ways  
in India

The cold stairs down to the water  
their breathing rasping hoarsely in the winter mist

The tall dark mountains burying their faces  
in the false snow to stifle their laughter

The river wailing with the strange voices of the lost  
riding on until all it felt  
was the darkness and the rush of stranger seas

This country urges us to seek the stars at night,  
too full as we are of mythic battles, angry gods  
and the heroism of Hanuman. Upon those  
distant pinpoints of light we might reconstruct  
some other world, denying memory, journeying  
no more. No more. Ah love, we had read so much  
about you, about freedom. Was everything you did,  
Gandhiji, only an act you put on for posterity ?

With India, our India, barely worth raping ?

## 21

Alone again

I continue to nurse the sickness of fear.

Somewhere in the dark an engine whistles.

Night's secrets and the endless

purity of stars locked like my hands

under my head. Listening, to my own efforts  
at quietening memory; and knotting this body,  
coaxing the fragments of living into a poem.

I know I have been in love with the world

a little too much, taken my own place

*for granted and become the secret landscape*

like the redeeming monument of a Gandhi

in the India of my illusive glass.

Here the dead twigs of banyan

scratch my skin; and farther, go on to tear

the skies of my future. Alone again,

with time to question myself,

I begin with the kind things I must say to others

because of my fear,

with the liniment of acceptance

spread over my wounded past's breast,

knowing that the pigeons of my town

must fly and perch on the unspoken sadness

of the bronze statue

decapitated once in sudden redness.

## 22

A black bile of mad unrest  
runs out of avenging mouths  
For this is the hour of the deep sigh  
that shakes the politicians' dust of Delhi  
The hour when cold cêment benches of the city parks  
stalk the blood of man, when  
my History of omens and fears and revenge  
rages in the stars  
This is the hour of breaking out  
of the moral restraints of my country's adolescence  
as the evil of senseless rumours swarms over me,  
urging me to find my place in the world of my people—  
And what else but an evening of claustral shadow  
that would let one embrace wanton nightmare?

Past the eardrums bursting  
with the hoarse mindless shouting of the mob  
Past the vastness of the sky  
which holds the seed of things to come  
And the sad doors set within arched frames  
where stand the women with lines of age  
giving their features a powerful dignity  
Past the jade green crowns of banyans  
which conceal the illusions of a bastard past:

the light and the fire,  
the ambiguous abandon of the elemental spirit

They wave their moist hands of red blood  
 For this is the hour when the evening once more  
 demonstrates its passionless mediocrity  
 And the womb of the Sun longs perhaps  
 for the carrion stench of terror  
 to link one bit of Time  
 to another  
 And the long pulse of soft flute notes  
 to revoke its rapist behaviour in our own prehistoric pack

Golden smoke in the autumn darkness  
 rises and turns only to exhort them to some terrible unity  
 more than ever for the 'good' of their country  
 Even though no one answers anyone any more  
 And the last words of Man keep on  
 following the evening:  
*How false they seem, even to themselves*

And the jasmine's arms stretch out  
 over the frantic waters of the Yamuna  
 The evening subdued by the blood-oracle's fatality  
 to tremble its way into something resembling Sleep

## 23

The huge siren hangs over acres of empty streets where a child looks across its dead mother into his face, its all-white emptiness echoing. He is its father but he is afraid to pull the child into his arms, even to call out its name, afraid his heart would burst. Unmilked cows lie stretched out in the fields, while the impotent cry of warning tightens its coils round the child's throat. Someone's feces left behind nearby, as he lay dying; couldn't they smell it? In this darkness the child's innocence is almost like a ripe fruit, it tries to keep its death still. You might, after all, take this as another episode in an enormous pathological dream of Dharma. And let your camera follow it, to tell all the tales that can be told. And then? So it would have changed so much in the journey you would no longer know it. Now the look on the child's face surprises a languor out of him. He smells the ocean he has never seen, the whole city around him tilting forlorn, roofless; and Leela, his child, who, under his gaze, is slowly growing less anxious about betraying those who love and trust her. A form of innocence tells: "Is your sky blue?" "Can you let it run between your fingers?"

## A DANCE OF BEJEWELLED SNAKES

*Come and see the blood in the streets.  
Come and see  
the blood in the streets  
Come and see the blood  
in the streets !*

—Pablo Neruda





*"Victim Number 569, Leela, aged 5, daughter of Dayaram  
of Chola Kenchi, Bhopal. Died of gas poisoning on  
3rd December 1984."*

*-India Today*

Cover Photograph, 31st Dec. 1984

i

The eyes are deep and hard in Leela's sockets.  
And the face looks peaceful in death.  
That's what they say, the onlookers.  
What would Leela have said  
had she grown up to her father's age ?

But her face,  
it seems to grow best in death.  
Her father Dayaram of Chola Kenchi  
would never believe me, his half-waking mind  
trying fruitlessly to drain the sea of his reality.

Soon he will burn Leela out of himself.  
Soon her eyes will soften, turn glutinous and fume.  
Perhaps something crueller  
will happen even here alongwith the fish  
rising gracefully from the river in wispy nets

## ii

In another nightmare I dream of Leela's eyes  
filling with pain, like sails filling with wind.  
Or perhaps it was only the utter certainty  
of her look, a steel that resolved  
the stillness of the world's make-believe.

This utter certainty of the horizon,  
which belongs to untroubled distance  
or to whoever comes across it.

Somewhere the rain kicks someone  
like an enraged feudal landlord,  
somewhere the wind cuts a tender face  
without reason like a mean whip.

Somewhere a dance of bejewelled snakes  
blinds two impoverished eyes,  
somewhere the iron bars uselessly shake  
the earth for the man who's been too long  
in prison.

Somewhere the rainwater  
tries to wash the stained earth clean,  
somewhere the wind carries the ash  
of a woman's burning flesh toward a man's  
dead mind.

Somewhere a winner  
lets himself go completely,  
somewhere a loser simply  
slumps against a lifeless worn prayer.

Somewhere someone looks on horrified  
as a trite quarrel slashes open another's  
viscera,  
a wind of rage points to its goal  
and shatters the moment like a bomb.

In a little corner of tenderness one tries  
to hide in

can one catch one's breath?  
Ah wind, that in another moment  
can engulf all torture and leave no trace  
behind.

Strange is the place to which you never belong.  
But somewhere among the crowd you are there.  
Young men stand in the crossroads, suddenly taller,  
without fear.  
There is nothing wrong with the moment, you know.  
The rain slowly settles down, the wind blows smooth  
and clear.  
The tree outside the window just quivers to grasp  
more air.

With its black face the thunder  
breaks into silence, the rain collides  
noisily with earth, and an unsettled nation  
unsettles further. In the steep wind  
the bamboos stoop over the mossed stones  
of temples, in this weather the crooked new grass  
occupies the places of others. The sodden rats  
of memory scamper from their water-logged holes,  
desperately we try to find out where  
our lives have brought us. So many things,  
■ the country's leaders wait for a sign,  
and a future this present will not enable us  
to live in. Who cares about others' sorrows,  
those victims like winged insects  
drawn from the earth after rain? As we must never  
question and must pretend not to know,  
our pain like water buries its face  
on earth's shoulder and goes off to sleep  
like a weary child. When we learn to let  
our minds leave us, we do not care where  
true feeling lies, or for a country's  
national anthem floating around in counterfeit freedom;  
its time moves to echo the rain-voice  
lying too deep for our nerves' reach, besieging  
in vain the poet's lonely walls. Then  
our hands stretch forward to touch those  
who are strange to us. And we hear  
water folding and turning restlessly on stone.

## 27

Fears of sinking boats blacken this noon;  
the harsh summer turns into an endless wound.  
Our eyes draw brightness from their fires  
and dim from too much brilliance.  
We bring our memories out from nowhere  
so that they penetrate the hour's haze:  
the view of the old changes. Slowly  
a line of time smoothens out on my brow.

Blue skies have settled on the hill,  
in my eyes birds pull still  
at the loneliness of earth.  
Here my hands stiffen for the struggle of truth,  
and the lips part as if to speak of death  
for that would only reveal our purpose  
to sink our roots and nourish the music of blood.  
Your face reappears at the door  
like a dry riverbed that shall be flooded  
in the rains of our fabrications.

And the memory moves past me  
measuring the distances that frighten us.  
Voyages of lost travellers, hypnotised feelings  
on walls of stone, we follow you numbly  
from summer to summer,  
easier to get at the history which defeats us.

## 28

The country we try to leave behind  
seems upset by its own silence.

Someone wants to make us believe  
that future generations  
will go on with the games we have played.  
Our people recognize the sweet smell of danger  
and go back to sleep in the shadows of trees.  
The young are excited by mysterious graffiti  
on walls and monuments  
and crouch like animals  
at the edge of this breathless jungle.  
Or perhaps like mosquitoes enraged  
in the heavy heat.

Skinny sad-eyed cattle of our day  
are overpowered  
by the strong smell of sun-warmed leaves and grass.  
And by the sinister shadow  
of the minister with the dark power of his  
government  
in the merciful sun.

For although the dead don't answer  
and the November stars are only in the way  
the country we try to leave behind  
will let someone in some year to come  
possess that silence of freedom from fate.



**29**

The leaves of the dark tree of India  
are gasping for breath  
across the green air.

An owl circles and chases a tale  
through the leaves, a star  
looks fixed in space's old embrace.

And I have a dream.  
It is like a boy in a classroom  
who hasn't understood what teacher is saying  
but puts on a knowing smile for all to believe.

I can only hear the hum of silent, shut-in machinery.

## 30

Now that your dark night slips free  
of the burning grasp of age-old stars,  
now that joy is a feeble bloom of light  
dispersing in the thin waters of memory,  
my hardened life can find no answers.  
Your gaff has sunk deep into the earth,  
yet summer and winter shall come back once  
to roll over and over in the torn grass  
and tremble again in the stricken skins  
of our homes. And now, what hand  
do you hold out fondly for us?  
What look of triumph that must pass  
into the silence of the world, ever?  
This darkness has lived long enough  
for its nights to overcome its victims.  
Meekly you watch a woman's broken nails  
draw blood on her last cry's rim,  
you observe the white meadow turn over  
as blazing tigers  
lair inside your great bowl of mysteries.  
Perhaps deaf now, you're empty of meaning,  
walking, stirring, reaching ahead of me.  
I can now hear the broken voice of the night,  
crying in my hands, bloody and black,  
and carrying with it the faint smells  
of flowers well past their best.

The morning's streets are already astir  
 with dappled autumn sunlight.  
 Distantly, cars roar past the Embassies.  
 Stretched along the quietude of trees  
 Death lies frozen, wondering  
 if the light birdcalls will give Him away.  
 Clusters of yellow flowers peep out  
 with their queer wild gaze:  
 ah, the dimensions of an old anguish.

A man stands there, afraid of what She is,  
 the blossoms of revenge ablaze on his face.  
 Bringing up the past is part of the game,  
 his ominous dark patina of poetic justice.  
 And in this light a sten gun  
 on the side of cruel reason sings.  
 Suddenly the day has grown colder. Further away  
 a young girl called Priyanka hears something  
 which makes her heart feel like a hot ball of lead.

Who knows what kind of myth  
 this is going to make in a hundred years?  
 Schooling in Europe, listening once  
 to Beethoven in your dress of Swiss voile,  
 how would you know you'd be alone, all alone  
 the final days, building your whole life upon it,  
 your solitude the same thing as your India, your dream?

Today I'm finding it harder than ever  
as I think of putting myself in your shoes.  
You are surer than my sleep, a fierce seed  
in the earth, overwhelming as a waterfall  
in Venezuela. A smell of burning leaves  
stifles the sunlight. Something  
comes flapping through the sky as I watch:  
the same cloud of paranoia, talons glinting in the sun.

## 32

Shantytown, go climb up the mansions  
of your beautiful dream city,  
learn English,  
fight against your dark sleep.  
Once there were thirteen years that pulled the soft body  
of Lakshmi out of shape,  
and those years understood that she was merely agreeing  
with anything that would stop the boredom for a while,  
and they made her smell their smells  
and feel their presence of pelts and blood.  
Once there were thirteen years that breathed still,  
making her pregnant nine times in those thirteen years,  
watching her,  
waiting for the death she owed them.  
Earth was a plain grey ramp  
on which the children stand and stare,  
looking for the performance when it gets under way.  
They put on expressions which are attempts  
to duplicate Amitabh Bachchan's, and wander across  
the rough ground beyond their bare brown legs.  
Who knew the stranger advancing toward them,  
proud to the sickness and the hunger and the loss,  
vain to the sun and the sky,  
smiling and looking for ways  
to hide reality from people?  
who knew of plans  
that could lead the heart to an excited beat?  
The dream city grows closer

and people can feel the fear of it.

The voice from a distant loudspeaker  
fails to reveal the empty smile of its speaker.

The death Lakshmi owed her thirteen years  
in the messy veranda of Intensive Care

was broken in upon by celebrating voices and wild  
laughter

before it rolled over and faced the blue of the sky.

They say

the hand doesn't need to understand  
what it can help to do well.

And the door doesn't need to know  
why it looked on into a short evening of honesty.

This city is too perfect to let others destroy it.

In the long play toward nothing,  
the children think they hear themselves laughing —  
they hear it in front of them, and stop,  
holding their breaths

as though they were isolating a moment in time,  
perhaps explorers,  
prepared for crueller deaths;

and the women, ugly,  
but trying hard to be tempting.

Shantytown,

Salute the great dream city.

Isn't it written that their eyes shall be lost  
behind their darker sleep

with their shadows running ahead?

Never say that their years are flayed from them.  
Never say that those flowers are for their hair.  
Never talk of pity, or beauty, laughter or honour.  
Remember their breasts are meat, the dream city's  
share.

For if anything happens,  
their dreams of belief tell them that their gods  
and their government shall take care of them.

## 33

Noon. Stale smells in her shack  
 of turmeric and burnt oil.  
 A door of straw, with its look  
 she is always waiting for,  
 but rich, clandestine.

Echoing whispers  
 of voices behind the bars  
 of light: Yashoda,  
 are you arranging another abortion  
 for your fourteen-year daughter?

The glare of noon startles.  
 She could choke on it.  
 Why do you need a family, Yashoda?  
 She had learnt to expect lies  
 and tears, fights,  
 a little rice and vegetables,  
 similar blessings,  
 the bite of human beings.

Noon growing, night and noon.  
 The door: should it  
 keep the silences off?  
 Time might beguile her into betrayals,



but she will sit up to all hours  
hearing her favorite  
film songs over the radio.  
Brimful of light,  
she cannot keep the door of her heart's shack  
closed,  
to see purpose or meaning  
or all such difficult things.

## 34

we are given to hate one another  
Five thousand years of incense permeates our skin  
Banana leaves coolly raise their hatchets  
while history slips through the fingers of air  
and falls on the hard earth

Only our children will know  
when it arises again, loose and shapeless  
In its clenched fists  
the rusty blade of a long-dead emperor

## 35

Deep dusk, trees left behind on the earth  
like slum boys left to fend for their own.  
Those hill slopes keep growing darker. Just beyond  
the backyard fence two nameless children  
kindle a fire and feverishly skin a freshly killed  
pigeon.  
Soft screams keep their hunger wakeful and large.

Once, I remember, I was awakened  
by someone's laughter outside the window.  
It was evening. I did not recognize  
the voices. Was it true what they were saying  
about me? Innocence was revealed to me  
in a land less barren and ruinous —  
not my own. Draupadi had dragged  
her battered body into the night  
but already the dawn had spread inside her soul  
its wide grey solitude.

But look: how the moon still  
shows a long lost time  
in the rust-stained rainwater in a stone's hollow.  
Bells ring somewhere. But the glow is stale  
as though from a thousand dead fingertips,  
and the night passes, and white flowers  
open in the tumbled turf  
showing their small charred skulls.

Seeking rest, sanctuary,  
I stamp out what's left of the fire,  
scatter the ashes.

The trees appear to take the entire weight of the  
earth.

Dark roots spread around the land's face  
with the same unattainable smile,  
gestures of a future divinity.

## OTHER BOOKS BY JAYANTA MAHAPATRA

### POETRY :

- Close the Sky, Ten by Ten (Dialogue, Calcutta, 1971)  
Svayamvara & Other Poems (Writers' Workshop, Calcutta, 1971)  
A Father's Hours (United Writers, Calcutta, 1976)  
A Rain of Rites (University of Georgia Press, Athens, 1976)  
Waiting (Samkaleen Prakashan, Delhi, 1979)  
The False Start (Cleaning House, Bombay, 1980)  
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Burden of Waves & Fruit—forthcoming—(Three Continents Press, Washington, D C., 1986)

### POETRY TRANSLATIONS :

- Countermeasures, 1973  
Wings of the Past, 1976  
Song of Kubja & Other Poems, 1981

### EDITED :

- South & West (USA) : (Special India Issue, 1973)  
Chandrabhaga : (A magazine of new writing from India)  
The Telegraph : Poetry Editor

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